



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,  
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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drinks, with which it in some respects might be compared. Be this said without any intention to offend the laudable temperance cause.

I am afraid I have now kept your attention longer than your interest, and must, therefore, bring my paper to a rapid close. I have tried to demonstrate, first, the necessity of Physical Education in the school, and then the means we have at our disposal for such an education—placing systematic gymnastics foremost, as that for which nothing else can be substituted. Then I have endeavoured to point out the broad principles and considerations that ought to be kept in view in arranging the gymnastic instruction, at the same time purposely avoiding going into the details, or even mentioning the name, of any special system of gymnastics. But, that I should unhesitatingly advocate Ling's Swedish system, will, I dare say, from the beginning have been regarded as a foregone conclusion by my audience. I admit, willingly, that such is the case, confident as I am that those of you to whom my representation of what a Physical Education ought to be has in any way appealed as sound and rational, will not think my preference unjustified, for this representation has in all essentials been but a description of the Swedish system of Physical Education.

## BIRDS OF LAKELAND.

### THE GREAT TITMOUSE: *PARUS MAJOR.*

BY MISS M. L. ARMITT.

WALKING along the bare woodlands, some mild and muggy January morning, one may hear all at once a sound familiar from byegone springs, and prophetic of a new spring: it is the loud love-couplet of the Great Titmouse. It is not, indeed, so loud as it will shortly be, but it is piercing enough withal. “Fee-dle, fee-dle, fee-dle,” says the bird, with beak opening wide at every reiterated accent; or, as a friend has aptly rendered it, with a drop from B flat to F, “*Eat-it, eat-it, eat-it.*”

This is the note that has earned for the bird the title of Saw-sharpener, which is apt enough. For there is a steel-edge quality in the tone reminiscent of all sorts of metallic occupations; and I have known a bird, by means of a third tone thrown lightly in (thus producing a triplet) to imitate the stroke of a blacksmith's hammer, with the shivering ring of the anvil that follows. Nay, I have even heard it produce a double stroke and ring, thus making its note a four-divided sound! But this is possibly refining! and certainly is asking too much consideration from the patient reader. As a matter of fact, no species of bird is invariable in its notes, though it has an actual code peculiar to the tribe, but will—in individuals of genius—occasionally exceed the limits of the tribal art; and so the loud love-note of the Great Titmouse may be roundly called a couplet.

This bird is besides a great conversationalist, like all Titmice. It talks with variety; is capable of a soft whistling—“*ou-ie, ou-ie,*” or “*mizzi-louie-louie,*”—which seems to bespeak a dual content; and, when flustered or excited, calls—“*speak, speak, shur-r r-r.*” Now these are notes for all the year, and are probably uttered by both the sexes, while the couplet is used by the male bird alone, and betokens the nesting tie. That it is heard thus early in the year implies that the bird's

companionship with its mate is not a matter of ten or twelve weeks alone. Indeed, the connection between the pair seems to be maintained throughout the year, maybe for a life-time; and I think (if the following facts are not too frail for theory) that the young bird does not wait for spring to seek and find its other half. Hard by the house one summer two Great Tits were noticed guarding a young one, newly fledged, with great solicitude, as if it were all that was left of their nestful; and it was my belief that the three Great Tits that visited our basket of fat throughout the following winter in moderate amicableness (an unusual thing) represented this family group. Now, by the 1st of February, the winter three had become four: there were two pairs, and "saw-sharpening," the mating signal, had been heard for some while before.

These birds, too, show a forethought about their nest, not a little singular. I have seen a pair in an indescribable state of bustle over a lately fallen tree, the male poking into its splinters and talking incessantly; and this on January 10th, with snow very deep upon a frozen ground. "Saw-sharpening" was heard close by this spot on December 29th, and no doubt it had reference to anticipatory joys called forth by the fallen tree.

The Great Titmouse, then, breeds in holes. There are not—in our scantily timbered country—many tree holes to be found, and for what there are there is often keen competition among the birds. So our Great Tit generally fixes up his home, like the Blue and the Coal Titmouse, in unmortared masonry. But he is astuter than his cousins in nest matters. Larger than they, and far more observant of man, he keeps his courtship and its results a profounder secret. One must be quite a dot upon the distant landscape (so to speak) to be able to watch, on some late April day, a couple in sprightly fussation about the outer wall of a boat shed and the adjacent tree, where they are choosing and fitting up for use some long orifice amongst the stones. The nest is generally placed well out of arm's reach in a building or high wall, and a tree is often near that shields the bird's approach. In the only exception I have known to this rule of height the low wall was faced by almost impenetrable shrubs. Nothing but a four-footed enemy—such as the cat—scaling an adjacent tree can break the bird's self-possessed silence; and then loud

and fearful outcries rise at this unforeseen danger. Otherwise, the secret is likely to remain theirs much longer.

The hen, as she sits upon her eggs, hidden within the hole that the sombre shades which in many species clothe the partner of the gaily-plumaged cock, may be due to the fact that the sitting hen requires all the protection that unnoticeable colouring can give her, since upon her depends the safety of the brood for weeks together. Now the cock and hen of the Great Titmouse, like all their cousins, are so much alike that it is a little difficult—unless the greater timidity of the one and a narrower breast stripe prove the feminine qualities—to tell the difference between them. However, as the hen Great Titmouse is completely hidden where she sits, she does not need the protection of a sombre dress, and the argument is not overthrown, but is rather confirmed—until we remember that the hen Redstart is hidden too, and yet is brown and dull—an awkward discrepancy, showing that theory is a fatal stool to sit firmly down upon!

Another matter of interest in connection with the Titmouse's gay plumage is, that it is at once assumed. The bird emerges from the dark nursery with colours and stripes and patches complete and bright, and has no dim speckly stage of adolescence to pass through. It is even yellower in hue than its parent, and has a white patch behind the head, similar to the Coal Tit, which will subsequently grow less distinct. Its breast stripe, however, is very small, and the feathers of its black head have not acquired the green sheen of the old birds. It is amusing to see how it can erect these feathers into a kind of crest, more in perplexity perhaps than alarm at a new object, for the parent has to warn it with cries of "*which! chur-r r,*" meaning "Ah! that's a human being. Take care!"\* From a forward nest and in

\* It is interesting to find that Professor Newton, in the very learned history of ornithology with which he has recently closed his *Dictionary of Birds*, has a few words to say about the colouration of birds. After discussing the very difficult problem of the classification of birds, and enumerating its many failures and discrepancies, he goes on to suggest that those species that assume an adult plumage at once, and in which the sexes are alike, may eventually prove to be higher in race than species in which hen and young are differently dressed; that they may have got over, and cast behind them, stages of development that are primitive and low. The inferior hen, the speckly youngster, then, would be signs of degradation; and the Robin and the Redstart might be reckoned inferior to the Titmice.

a forward season, the young may emerge in the last of May days, though the early ones of June are the more usual date. Food is brought to them in a bush for a while after flight, and at this stage they will shake their wings and dangle the caterpillar given to them, as if they were still at a loss to know how to eat it. The nest season of the Great Titmouse, as well as of the Blue, is almost exactly synchronous with the ravages of the caterpillar upon the spring foliage, more especially upon the foliage of the oak tree ; and but for the exertion of Titmice and other birds, I think our oak trees might in some years almost completely perish from defoliation. One has only to watch for ten minutes a pair of Great Tits supplying their brood on an early June day, to be aware of the immense number of grubs destroyed for the needs of one nursery alone. It is amazing to note the speed with which the parent (and both are busy) darts to the tree, seizes a caterpillar from a leaf back, then bruises it against the bough, puts it into its maw, and flies straight to the nest-hole with it ; then swiftly out again, and all *da capo*. And the ease with which these fat swarming bodies are procured at this time may possibly account for the large nurseries indulged in by the tribe of Titmice generally. But this season of bounty is short. The full-fed caterpillar of the Oak and other moths soon passes into the chrysalis stage, when the pupa lies within a fold of the leaf it has skilfully drawn together ; and this latter stage lasts scarcely longer than a couple of weeks. The moths emerge in one great simultaneous re-birth, on one of the last days of June, when—should the weather be hot—we may see them fluttering round the leaves in a light and moving cloud. Now, I have never known the nesting of a Titmouse prolonged to this period, nor indeed, past the middle of the month of June.

The Great Titmouse is at all times a lover of animal food, principally of the larvæ and pupæ of insects. It searches for them everywhere, up in the bark of trees, over newly-mown lawns, beneath fallen leaves, and in the moss of walls and rocks. It hunts over walls and house-faces, where spiders spread their toils and lay their eggs, and it clings to the rough-cast dwelling to catch these treasures. It opens the marble-gall—so I believe—to reach the central grub. It is a seed-eater, too, its powerful beak enabling it to deal with the

hardest seed-cases. It begins to work at the beech-nut, when this is fast screwed up within the burr. It hammers loud and long at the hazel-nut, and seems to be often mistakenly called, therefore, the Nuthatch. It eats sunflower seed, and elder berries, and yew berries. It is singular to see how it rejects the succulent red aril of the last, which is what all other birds desire, and feeds upon the hard green seed ; and this, as in every other case, it carries to a bough to break open.

All birds of the *Parus* family, and of some others, too, yield to its superior size and force. They make way at once, when food is in common, and wait meekly. Its presence terrifies them, if their nestlings are near, and I once saw a pair of Spotted Flycatchers fly at it courageously on this account to chase it away. It took, however, not the least notice of them ; it was spying up at the ruins of a wasp's nest in the verandah roof, which it had doubtless picked to pieces itself, and was now looking to see if any more grubs remained. The next winter I watched it rip open the deserted nest of these very flycatchers, when probably it was looking for the odd insects that are left to breed in nests. I even suspected it to be the culprit who subsequently tore open the beautiful Wren's nest built in the roof of the same verandah. If so, this possibly was jealousy ; for I observed that the little Wrens, that went regularly to bed in this new-made nest from July onwards, became afraid to do so after the Great Titmouse and mate resumed their roosting rights in the cornice of the verandah, which they did in late August, when family cares were over. However, the Great Titmouse does not scorn the company of his inferiors in size when all patrol the bare woods together, and all have no doubt, a common terror of the prowling Sparrow-hawk. Still, he keeps them in order. The Blue Tit, perching accidentally too near his mate, is made for at once ; and he can scold and terrify the Longtail until this is petrified with fright. He is, in fact, the lord of the little birds in general.